QUIXOTE VARIATIONS

RAMON FERNANDEZ

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY ALFRED NOYES

AFTERWORD BY STEPHEN COLLIS

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On Translation *or,* My Ramon Fernandez

ALFRED NOYES

Fernandez Fernandez Fernandez – it's the most ordinary of Spanish names. And yet, in Madrid in the early 1920s, the name was on everyone's lips, and everyone was quoting lines from his poem.

– Federico Garcia Lorca

1. I suspect narrative of every complicity with which it has ever been charged, but as a Spanish poet reminds me, even narrative, yes, narrative, was once insurgent, once a radical break with the complacency of a culture of images and idolatry. A dive off into radical discursivity. Into the abstraction of words. Let's hope this was so.

2. Upon what does the researcher of revolution rely? The scholarship of the impossible. A wind or whisper wafting over the ashes where the records were burnt. This is one thing, to take history to task, but translation is another: a poem is not history, and it may not always serve it well to imagine what it has left out, or what was lost in its burnt drafts and smouldering process. "Poetic license" belongs to poets. Translators carry less august papers. The material fact of a particular poem in a particular language in a particular condition is unmoved mover.

3. Gerald Brennan once wrote: "It is characteristic of Spaniards to be satisfied with gestures and petty acts of defiance and courage

and to neglect the real heart of the matter." This is the outsider's view, so I will not assess its truthfulness. However, it is clear to me that many translators of Spanish poetry are indeed satisfied with such gestures and petty acts. I did not begin my translation of Fernandez in response to Collis's; I had begun work on this material long before that. But I must now respond in some way to this most recent appearance of Fernandez's work, as it is the potential cause of a number of misunderstandings.

4. I am no believer in the inviolability of poetry. Poetry is always violation, intrusion, appropriation, theft. Translation, however, is built upon a tradition, less of stealing, than of well-mannered borrowing. When I borrow a neighbour's axe, I strive to return it to him sharper than when I received it. It seems common courtesy. So with the poem.

5. Ramon Fernandez was born in Andalusia, like many poets. He led a Spanish intellectual's and rebel's life not untypical of the early twentieth-century. But he was more in the mould of Chilean Vicente Huidobro than other Spanish poets of his day (the Machados, Altolaguirres, and Lorcas). There was an uninhibited wildness, it seems, a sense driving him not of a very old world with its rich traditions but of a very new one only just beginning to dawn. But we know very little about him, and he was, in almost every sense of the word, a "minor" poet. The figure he cut amidst the Madrid literati was shadowy and fleeting; he left literary circles in the Spanish capital at some point in the mid 1920s, showing up on a factory floor in Barcelona (sewing leather boots). It is not clear whether he was abandoning his educated middle class position or, as some have contended, merely a peasant/worker who by some miraculous ascension found himself amidst the ranks of the literati for a time, before returning to his forsaken class roots. However that may be, we know that in the Summer of 1936 he marched into Aragon in the Ascaso Column, an anarchist militia, and was never seen again. He comes down to us as the author of a few short ballads published (anonymously) in anarchist workers' newspapers (such as *Solidaridad Obrera*) and as the reputed author of one long poem, unpublished in full but well-known in manuscript: "Variaciónes del Quixote." Little else is reliably known.

6. In *Anarchive* (New Star Books, 2005), Collis's "Variaciónes" are not Fernandez's, despite the attribution. Only fragments cohere, and these in substantially altered form. The most serious imposition is the introduction of firebrand anarchist Buenaventura Durruti, a figure I nowhere find mention of in Fernandez (despite the latter's political affiliations). I have no doubt Stephen Collis has read something of Fernandez's work, but only a ghost of the latter hovers in these free-wheeling variations-of-variations. (I do not know where Collis came across Fernandez's work, though I suspect the only likely source to have been the fragments of the "Variaciónes" published in *Litoral* – where it appeared in the November 1920 issue – or else the translation of the same as reproduced in *The Spanish Civil War in Literature: An International Bibliography*, edited by Peter Monteath, Greensward Press 1994.)

7. The material state of Fernandez's modernista masterpiece is the main problem. His few papers contain a jumble of handwritten verse passages, prose notes, and several drastically different typescripts of the poem entitled "Variaciónes del Quixote," which redeploy material from the jumbled handwritten passages that accompany the drafts. The only prior translations – of a short seven page section of the poem – by Edward Banderly (in the Monteath book) and in Collis's liberal misuse of the same material – are based on the *Litoral* fragment of 1920. But this fragment is substantially different from either longer typescript in Fernandez's papers; my suspicion is that the typescripts are later expansions of the earlier version. Thus, for my translation I have more or less ignored the *Litoral* fragment (there is every indication that the anonymous piece was placed in

the journal by Fernandez's friend Altolaguirre, without his consent or foreknowledge), relying instead on the longer typescript versions, cross-referencing them to arrive at as true and authoritative a draft as possible. I have included a few of the poet's prose notes as well – as "Variations on Variaciónes" – the only prose passages typed by Fernandez himself (the rest are handwritten fragments and difficult to discern). The title Fernandez gave the prose experiments (really, prose poems) indicates their connection, but their exact relation to the poem remains a mystery. Their translation has been perhaps the most difficult task, as they are themselves sorts of translations, cycling through increasingly complex and disjunctive reiterations and working linguistic variations that defy categorization as any one (or at least any known) language (the only analogy I can draw here is to Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*). I have tried to follow Fernandez's broken syntax and disjointed grammar as best I could, though it may be that these "Variations" are ultimately untranslatable.

8. Translation only really occurs – or at least, reaches its highest form and function – when the translated author is dead. Then translation is resurrection. Then translation is the great responsibility. It is memorial. A stone home for a lost poem.

9. The first poem was a translation from the visual world to the textual. It was an abstraction. Translation is abstract. It is "taken out" of its original context. What is "taken out" is the author of the original. He or she is abstracted and placed in the new language/context: the translating poet and his or her language. The translator then writes as though he or she is the original poet, only the original poet's origin is now a new language/context. The translator is the poet, beginning again, and not knowing that he or she is in fact beginning again. The translator is the original poet forgetting his origin and beginning again, in a context (language) he does not realize is new.

10. Thus in being true to the past/origin, the translator must forget the past/origin. Just like language once had to forget images and images had first to forget fact.

11. Every poem, then, is a translation of a translation of the image-world that preceded the text-world. The translator must look in a mirror to see in a mirror the otherwise unseeable back of his head where he is beginning to bald. The exact geography of that landscape. The territory, not the map.

12. Todos es variable / cuando está vista en un espejo. "All is variable / when seen in a mirror." Here I translate the very act of translation. This is Collis's affront, his insult to Fernandez: he mistranslates the act of translation itself. He alters the apparatus, the procedure. Si estamos solos con palabras / porque los pozos sueltan de cada uno los ojos. "If we are alone with words / it is because wells spring from everyone's eyes." Alone with words. Not The Word. Just words. Real. Verifiable. Multiple. Unavoidable and common words. Each one a little mirror of the mirror of the image that preceded saying, and was a first reflection. Such abuses, as far as I can see, are the result of wanting to make the poet and poetry perfect reflections – thus to make Fernandez's poetry more overtly political, as we know (as much as we do know) his life to have been. I see this somewhat differently. It is pleasant to choose an ideological theme as a musician chooses the key of a piece, and draw out of it all that can be drawn. This is I think how Fernandez approached his verse: not as propaganda, but as poetical practice, creative vocation, and artistic exercise. Fernandez himself wrote that "the state of anarchy is not so serious as one would be tempted to believe. In spite of our worst extravagances we are moving towards unity – the unity of the dislocated and scattered." His other overtly political remark runs as follows: "each of us has individually to create his future." I believe he writes, in both these examples, of the poetic as much as the political sphere.

13. I am myself a minimalist. Every adornment is only a distraction.

This serves translation well. Fernandez was a minimalist trying to become a maximalist. He overflows himself, a river destroying his own bed. I suspect Collis is such a poet too, carving a new path each season he is in flood. Identities are importantly kept at distances. One can become another, I have no doubt, but only when one first sees the great gulf between oneself and another. In Collis and Fernandez, like meets like, and the results will not do. All is reflection, without substance. All is inflation, like spurring like on. A good translator is always different. A good translation is made at zero inflation and good rates of exchange.

14. But the good translator does not know, cannot know, he is different. He must assume he is looking in the mirror for the first time. Trying to see the back of his own head. The image that preceded the word. The world that preceded the image. This is where I have gone, in my quest to find this irrecoverable Spanish poet-Quixote. I place this translation of Fernandez before the world confident that I am by this act making a revelation; confident that I – as any translator worth his or her salt – am raising the dead into a new linguistic life; confident, at last, that we have now before us the most "complete" picture of Fernandez's singular and seminal work that we will ever have.

Quixote Variations

My child's faults
Lift verses out of variations

Through crushed Saturdays
And broken Mays

Never three soft days
Overwhelming us

Having neither marginal
Nor critical remarks

Nothing to register
Delight

That expression
Is eloquence's reason

Thus I agree to fill
Your margin

And offer a few pages

At the end of your book

Sublime stars and
Aristotle raised

Wounds the moon

Gallop away gallop away
Peasants of no plenty

Throwing volumes upon the fire
Latitude is planet's aggressor

Out of which Christian poets
Also spun webs of voyage

Though I would willingly excuse
The good captain who translated it

Deprived as he was of
Most of his primitive graces

Misfortune always for those
Who presume to translate verses

The incurable disease of poetry
And revolution thrown too to the fire

Book after book pastoral
Of the cataclysm of grammar

Words rupture incident
Pirouette lark frights

Break merger across
A breach in turn turn

Windmill
Wanders
Wastes
Outrages
Grace
In words
Earths
Dynasties
Unbegotten
Thought
Haste
Time
Fortune
A brick
Entombs
Failure
A dream
Verso
Converso
Revolution
And relapse
Windmill
Wandering
I forget

Second Undertaker
Relentless tyrant
Labouring to conceal

A certain remark
Here in the margin

Cruelty a human tongue
Taking the Moor with me

Rage infusing
No history ever made mention

Those fatal words
Mine and thine

Fury be my muse
Dread accents the noise
Thy voice groans

Lord of Complaints
Labouring that the winds

Shall survive in pitying echo
Love's cure is fierce disdain
Absence kills hope

My heart, Second Undertaker
Death crown'd
Fair destruction

Though oppressed
O Destruction!
Rave – I call you

More wretched than all night
Enchain'd in insurgent flame

And thou my song
Sad child of woe

Born free
I retired
So I might continue
To these solitary hills
Where only companions
And sources are ours
And the clear trees
Seem of crystal

With wind
I communicate
Cunning
And my thoughts
Go towards absence

I am a distant flame
And a sword far off
Having attacked seeing
They now deceive
Words demanding
The impossible
Speech of windmills

No giants
No knights
No caravans
No cats
No asparagus gardens
No golden quarters
No Moorish colonnades
No hedge

No stile
No first efflorescence
No guttering coals

Transformed in moments
Transformed in wind
Transformed in breath
Transformed in failure
Transformed in torture
Transformed in weaving
Transformed in roaring
Transformed in class
Transformed in ripening
Transformed in rotting
Transformed in reading
Transformed in writing

Here is some prose

Wound Flower

Earth Tongue

A beautiful madness in the life of the word
Noble Spirit, Other Hand

I tell it you as all tales are told
To wrest fiction from the dead hands of prose

O Lovely Disturber
The falsehood of your promises

Turning the remaining leaves

To meet nothing but accusations

Complaints expostulations
A tractor mad for the furrow

Coming through dark woods to part pages
And write social grief under stars luminescence

It is the world that is a verse
Where words and rivers merge

Dear Other, Dear Common
I will become your partner in sorrow

And strive to ease it
By a society in sadness

Naked
Neglect
Dishonest
Profits
Bourgeois
Plumage
Instruct
Frantic
Despair
Slaying
Shepherds
Flocks
Forgotten
Registrars
Fields
Tariffs

No one
Votes
Coffers
Vacant
Rent
And doom
Fascism
Or form

This too comes within the verge
Of my office – to hinder oppression

And succour those in misery –
If we are alone with words

It is because wells spring
From all eyes I seek

How is it learned
But through folly

Naked I enter the bed
Of eternal war

My hands intruding love
Where blind fortune hates

I become the penumbra
Of powers, know

Death is certain
Inconstancy distracting rage

As they would order nature
While nature must into its own orders fall

And I would keep to the chaos of growth
Open at the top and rising from the bottom

From dense histories
Feeble cries

Apparatuses for
Forging chains

To think of situations
From books I have read

Nothing but fire
Steel pounding into shape

Just as if it belonged
To heretics

The perverse and complicated
Language of their authors

I can wade grief
This river pulling down trees
Where hands reach out
To press fire to eyes

I can swim
Past lighthouses
This sea cutting rock

From rock
Turning windmill stones
Of words into blind shatter

I can dive
I can float

But this new nature needs
A wider and wilder moat
To keep these others lives at bay
With seasons shedding waters
Day by day
And tears undermining
The solidity of the bank

Nowhere nowhere
Can we refuse so much
To seek so little
And read history so lush

Variations on Variaciónes

I.

everything prospers more better possible when it is exit only of the desert and the open way and my fiancee, revolution declaiming the laws of the enthusiastic attraction of the passages of the loving world

everything prospers a possible one better when it is exit only of the desert and the open way and my fiancee, revolution declaiming the laws of the enthusiastic attraction of the passages of the affectionate world

everything prospers better possible when it is exit only of the desert and the open way and my fiancee, revolution declaiming the laws of the enthusiastic attraction of the passages of the affectionate world

everything prospers better possible when it has only left the desert and the open route and my fiancèe, revolution déclamant the laws of the enthusiastic attraction of the passages of the affectionate world

props possible better when it leaves only to the desert and the open itinerary and of fiancèe, I return déclamant the laws from the entusiastica attraction of the passages of the world affectio

props as far as possible more better when it leaves only to the desert and opened itinerary and fiancèe, 4 you will return déclamant laws from attractiveness entusiastica of passages affectio of the peace

the supports possible more far better when she only goes away to the

desert and the opened itinerary and fianc?e, 4 you will return laws d?clamant from the entusiastica of the attraction of affectio of the passages of La Paz

II.

there is no way that leads of metaphysics to the jump that impossible the way is the method to the elementary force that sweeps worshippers of science outside the special privilege of its knowledge

there is no way that takes of metaphysics to the jump that impossible the way is the method of the elementary force that sweeps admirers of science outside the special privilege of its knowledge

it is not felt us that income of metaphysics to the jump that impossible the sense is the method of the elementary force that sweeps the admirers of science outside the special privilege of the relative knowledge

they do not feel us that income of metaphysics to the gallop that impossibly a feeling it will be the method of elementary effort it podmechet the admirers of science out of the special privileges of the relative knowledge

they do not feel that rent to us of metaphysics to galope that a sensation he will be impossible the method of elementary effort he podmechet the admirers of science outside the special privileges of the relative knowledge

III.

Is to say the freedom is the mother not it daughter of the order and

the poem a corruption of the language that we needed to break itself to oppose to us

It is to say that the freedom is the mother not he daughter of the order and the poem a corruption of the language that we needed to break itself to oppose us

It must say that the freedom is the mother not he girl of the order and the poetry a corruption of the language that we to us had to break he himself to oppose

It must say that the freedom is the mother he girl of does not deal with and the poetry a corruption the language that we had his until breaking itself to oppose

It must say that, freedom will be which mother it girl it does not associate and poetry is the corruption language that we not to have it to to break in order to resist

It must say that, the freedom will be what mother girl he does not associate and the poetry is the language of the corruption that we not to have it to a to break itself to resist

IV.

temporary vestige constructed in the utópica cloud billowing that makes the poetry severe of the destruction of which other spontaneous orders will emerge and they are descoloran once again

vestige temporary constructed in the cloud of the utópica billowing that makes the poetry severe of the destruction of which other spontaneous orders will emerge and are descoloran again

provisional from vestige constructed in the cloud of the utópica that rise that returns the serious poetry from the destruction to which other spontaneous orders will arise and are still descoloran

provisional vestige of constructs in cloud of utópica that increases that returns the serious poetry from the destruction to which other spontaneous orders will present/display and are descoloran calm

provisional vestige building in cloud utypica increases that it returns serious poetry from the destruction to by other spontaneously orders they bequeath present/display and will be calm descoloran

the provisional building of vestige in increases of the ut?pica of the cloud that spontaneously returns serious poetry from the destruction by a another one requests them bequeaths present/display and will be descoloran calm

V.

is not the anarchy its own order? díganos, when the light has redistributed through the night expropriated and disassembled disassembling fires they do not allow the pure production of the free association?

is not the anarchy its own order? the díganos, when the light has redistributed through the fires that disassembled expropriated and disassembled at night they does not allow the pure production of the free association?

isn't anarchy its own order? the díganos, when the light redistributed by fires which dismounted exproprié and dismounted the night the pure production of free association does not allow them?

is not anarchy relative really treats? the díganos, when the redistributed fire light that disassembled the expropiado one and disassembled to the night the pure production of the free association does not allow them?

not anarchy care of relative it is actual? dHganos, when the redistributed light of fire which did dismantle expropiado one and after 4 was dismantled to night purely production of free association do not allow them?

taken care of of the anarchy of the relative he is not real? d?ganos, when the redistributed light of the fire that disassembled the expropiado one and after 4 were disassembled to the production at night purely of the free association does not allow them?

VI.

Creative disorders of Or that rage! the volcano of values enters eruption again spilling the fire and capital in the tongue-pieces of fallen angels and the empires and the states

That creative rage or disorders! the volcano of values incorporates the eruption that again spills the fire and the capital in the lengu!eta-pieces of fallen angels and the empires and the states

This creative fury or disorders! the volcano of the values incorporates the eruption that still invests to the fire and the capital in - the pieces lengüeta of fallen angels and the empires and the States

This created fury or disorders you! the volcano of the values includes the eruption that strengthens invests to the fire and the capital in - the tongue-piece of the parts of the fallen angels and empires and declares

This created fury or disorders you! the volcano of values vklyuayet eruption it strengthens it invests to the fire and the capital inside - the language -.cast6 of the parts of the fallen angels and empires it declares

This created fury or disorders you! the volcano of the eruption of vklyuayet of the values that consolidates it invests to the fire and to the interior of the capital - the language -.cast6 of the parts of the angels and the fallen empire declares

VII

the sample is burned again in the Earth: to have more asylum it is to have to rebel, giving the direction above of the invisible pilots in the thickness of the popular storm

the sample is burned again in the Earth: in order to have more asylum it must have to rebel, giving the direction above of the invisible pilots in the thickness of the popular storm

the sample is still burned in the Earth: with the purpose of having more asylum it must have to rebel itself, giving the direction here above of the invisible pilots in the thickness of the popular one give assault a

Earth anchor is burned to the champion: with the purpose of having more asylum it must have to rebel itself in if, giving the sense here on pilots of invisibili in of spessore of a popular assault to of give

The anchor of the earth is burnt to the champion: with the purpose of to have more asylum it itself must incite to revolt inside if, dayushch a feeling here on pilots invisibili inside spessore popular assault to the pliability

The Earth anchor burns the champion: in order to have more asylum itself it must urge to rebel inner if, dayushch a sensation here in invisibili of the pilots within the popular assault of spessore to the flexibility

The Plebeian Cantos, An Afterward

STEPHEN COLLIS

If I am able, I will eradicate my own personal voice and let the voices of all my brothers and sisters, oppressed through all time, ring out through my lips, leap up out of my throat, and pirouette off my tongue – demanding that they be heard, that they be free, that they be the base of whatever we build.

– Ramon Fernandez

It's the limits – or limitlessness – of poems and books that interest me most. What version of Wordsworth's *Prelude* is the "correct" one? Which iteration of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* is most "authentic"? Robert Duncan wrote *Groundwork* as preparation for a poetry he did not live to write. Wordsworth's *Prelude*, too, is an overture to a broader project that never quite arrived. It's somewhere amidst these sorts of projects that I would situate Ramon Fernandez's remarkably suggestive, never quite achieved poetry to which, I contend, these "Variations," so ably translated by Alfred Noyes, are a mere prelude. I do not think Mr. Noyes agrees with me on this point – but he himself is of a capacious enough mind and heart to have allowed me to append this "dissenting opinion" to his Fernandez. Works like Wordsworth's and Whitman's defy containment and singularity; they are all their diverse versions and more – an incalculable poetic equation far greater than the sum of its contradictory parts. Duncan's *Passages* poems perhaps come closest: they, in the poet's words, "belong to a series that extends in an area larger than my work in them." It is that "area larger" that is the wonder in poetry – the suggestion, amidst poetry's inherent brevity, of a wider field of intellectual and emotional play the poem we read is a condensation of.

The evidence that the "Variations" were meant to take their place as a prelude to a longer more diverse work is to be found in the prose fragments and notes amongst Fernandez's sparse papers. The evidence is slight, but to me there is enough. Clearly, by far the largest portion of Fernandez's archive is missing – presumably forever lost. That there must have been more material goes without question – in a career that saw the poet writing (if not publishing), by all accounts, steadily, albeit slowly, from at least 1918 until his disappearance in 1936, a far larger archive than the few dozen pages we have is clearly indicated. Amongst these lost papers surely the material of a long, ambitious, modernist epic would be found. This longer, lost poem was called by Fernandez the "Plebeian Cantos." The "Quixote Variations" were meant to be its preface.

The notes upon which I base this claim are as follows:

> "The Quixote is the atrium – up and out from there."
>
> "The Real Work: a poem to sweep up all the most common experiences, to take language from the base, and lift it into poetry from there, so that all time's peasants and poor may sing spontaneously together, each voice audible and in harmony, of the great common cause of liberty."
>
> "Write a 'Plebeian Cantos' – an endless series to sweep up all my efforts as a poet, past, present, and future. Notes to follow. Prose and poetry. Open at the top and rising from the bottom."

They are in Fernandez's hand and somewhat difficult to decipher. They are on separate pieces of paper, though the first includes the draft of a fragment poem, and the last is in a small notebook from

which most of the pages have been torn and lost, but which also includes some material worked into the typescripts of the "Quixote." The notebook also includes, on its back fly-leaf, a list of books read or to read, which includes Huidobro, Hernandez, Breton, and "the American Pound."

Noyes, while disagreeing with my interpretation, has generously agreed to provide these translations, and to include them here in this book. I have placed the prose fragments in this order to support my suggestion that all three can be connected: the "Quixote" is "the atrium" to "The Real Work": the "Plebeian Cantos." Noyes and I both agree that the latter two passages belong together or refer to the same project (the second quotation is on a piece of torn paper that may very well have been removed from the battered notebook); the connection between these and the "Quixote" poem is where Noyes and I disagree, as he maintains that there is "no material connection between the statements." While this is true (the paper is clearly from a different source, and the handwriting suggests they are written at different points in Fernandez's writing life), it does beg the question: what is the "Quixote" the "atrium" to? The movement indicated, "up" from the "Quixote," also, for me, connects the fragments (the references to the "base," "lifting," "rising," and the "bottom" all indicate an upward movement in step with Fernandez's anarchism): this is more or less a quotation from the poet's own "Quixote."

What, however, does any of this matter? Who cares if the "Quixote" was meant to initiate a longer poem which we no longer have access to or which may never have been written? We read Wordsworth's *Prelude* without reference to the absent "Recluse" it was supposed to introduce; what does it matter if we do the same with Fernandez? I think whenever we can have access to a more complete understanding of a work's place in an artist's overall practice or project our reading of that work will be greatly enriched. Furthermore, in this particular situation, the missing poetry may help answer what are for me nagging questions: why did this apparently committed anarchist spend so many years working on poetic variations on that most literary and canonical of Spanish works? Where in this long, formally innovative poem – seemingly immersed in the aesthetic concern of radical modernismo – are the poet's radical politics? Certainly Fernandez's political concerns make some appearance, but mostly in aestheticized form. Could it be that the "Plebeian Cantos" were meant to be that more overtly political work that the "Quixote" forms a merely ornamental flourish and aria to? Could it also be that Fernandez begins with Cervantes only, in the body of the missing poem, to overturn such quintessential Spanishness – to move Spanish literature from knights and quests (however parodically deployed) to the real work of class struggle, the liberation of the human spirit, and the implementation of communismo libertario (the goal of Fernandez's union, the CNT)? We may never have the answers to such questions – but the clues are tantalizing and the textual hints provocative.

I have a further theory regarding the mysterious "Plebeian Cantos." I think that many of the difficult-to-decipher notes that remain amongst Fernandez's scant papers are themselves also working notes, even, in some instances, drafts of the opening "cantos" of the long poem. I think – with some work, and some imagination – several cantos could be reasonably reconstructed. Their shape is still fairly indistinct. But this is the point of a poem intended to "sweep up" all experience, all an artist's work into a frameless frame.

The revolutionary poetics of the "Plebeian Cantos" can be found in two other prose fragments from Fernandez's papers. These two – written out in a careful hand on the first page of Fernandez's much-abused notebook – are set in direct counterpoint to each other, and the hypothetical poem's trajectory can be plotted through the intellectual space they map out.

"Even narrative was once a revolution in form."

"To wrest fiction from the dead hands of prose."

Here is the key to this poet's work – a work which we will never really be able to read, but which, through the tireless efforts of Alfred Noyes, we can at least glimpse the shadow of what we may be missing. The project is to tell a story – a deeply necessary story – but not to tell it in any expected or ordinary way. The novel is a thoroughly bourgeois art form; it is the product of capitalism, and reproduces the same inevitably. The story that needs to be told must come in a new form, which is simultaneously a return to the oldest of all forms – the story before it became ossified as "narrative." Or – and this seems closest to Fernandez's point – narrative, at its origin, is an entirely radical gesture – a leap out of a culture of idolatry and the Image (think cave paintings and stone idols) into one of abstract narrative. This was one of the greatest of historical revolutions, equal to, and perhaps even coeval with, the invention of agriculture. "Civilization," as we have understood it throughout "written" history, is a story – is Story as such. Fernandez is sensing, and announcing, its end. For the tale of the tribe to be told now, he is saying, it must do so in a way that recalls that first opening of story, when narrative was the radical new invention. Fiction is still completely necessary – what is utopianism, what is the re-visioning of the future, Futurity itself – but the implementation of a fiction. But the new fiction we need now – stepping into the crucible of the twentieth century – must be one that *wrests* the fictive "from the dead hands of prose."

This is what – seventy years after Fernandez – we still have not found: a new mode of story. Our fictions are still imprisoned in "the dead hands of prose," and we still haven't escaped the prison house of the history we have been telling, the "civilization" we have been enduring, as it shreds lives, classes, species, environments – reaching a frenzy of self-destruction.

Fernandez's effort to bring story back to the point at which the very technology of narrative was radically new explains his choice of the "Quixote" as a starting point or "atrium" to his project. Cervantes's novel is widely recognized as the first of the genre – the first modern novel. Why not go back here to the place our dominant narrative genre began? It is interesting then that Fernandez focuses, in his "Quixote," repeatedly on those scenes and moments in Cervantes's great book in which storytelling and textuality is itself the subject: the destruction of Don Quixote's library, the discovery of the shepherd poet's works, and perhaps most significantly, the complex existence of the narrative's "second undertaker." The story of Don Quixote, Cervantes tells us, comes highly mediated. There is the first history of the famous night, which breaks off mid-scene; then there is another version of the story, found in the Alcana market in Toledo, "written in characters I knew to be Arabic." These our "second author," the narrator who has been reading and relaying Don Quixote's story to us, has translated by a Morisco "into the Castilian language," and on our story goes.

Fernandez, in working variations on the Quixote story, takes up a position as, really, a third or even fourth "author" of the Quixote. He enters into a space where story is communal, collective – where story is the very erasure of authors and authority. He works variations upon what turn out to already be variations, versions – inauthenticities. No true and complete story of the knight's strange adventures is possible. Interestingly, so too no true and complete version of Fernandez's "*Variaciónes*" is available to us. And – this could be the poet's point? – no true and complete version of the 1936 revolution in Catalonia is possible – its history also comes down to us second or third hand, highly mediated and saturated with the textures added by its various story tellers.

With Alfred Noyes stepping bravely into the fray, we now have

another author, another "undertaker." The story of Don Quixote grows in complexity, layers, levels of mediation. The community bringing the tale to us extends. The work itself (what on earth can we now name "the work" – what body does it consist of?) has broken down all limits, all sense of definable shape and borders. Noyes gives versions of Fernandez who gives versions of Cervantes who (to enter faithfully into the fiction) gives us versions of Cide Hamete Benengeli (the author of the Arabic manuscript found in the market), who got the story from who knows where. We are drawn back back back into a shadowy place of story's origin in the revolutionary discovery of narrative – a possibly endless chain formed link after link after link.

I can only hope to be able to offer a marginal comment on this limitless manuscript, a "few pages at the end of your book." I am honoured to do so.

RAMON FERNANDEZ (1898-1936?) was a Spanish poet and anarchist union organizer who was killed fighting on the Aragonese front during the Spanish Civil War. This is the first translation of his work into English.

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